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ABSTRACT

The effects of being six months younger than grade level were studied using seventh through twelfth grade students in Montgomery County (MD) Public Schools. The racial, sexual, and academic characteristics of the accelerated students and the effects of age/grade differences on selected academic areas and social activities were examined using school records and separate telephone interviews with 73 percent of a sample of students and their parents. A young student was defined as being at least six months younger than the traditional age as determined by Maryland's December 31 cut off date. The group of students was found to be experiencing little difficulty in school because of age. Students' and parents' positive feelings about the consequences of early placement are discussed. The results suggest that parents and practitioners should not be overly cautious about early admissions and that many students can profit from starting school early or skipping a grade. (Author/CM)

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A STUDY OF THE EFFECTS ON ADOLESCENTS OF SKIPPING A GRADE OR STARTING SCHOOL EARLY

By

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TM 820 463

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INTRODUCTION

In 1978-79 Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) developed a pilot program to identify selection criteria for early admission to first grade. This action was prompted by a change in the Maryland State Bylaw which allows five year olds to enter the first grade. One concern raised by administrators, parents, and teachers involved with the pilot program was how early admissions would affect students, as they progress through the junior and senior high schools, faced with additional emotional and physical pressures that occur in adolescence.

Consequently, the Department of Educational Accountability undertook a limited study of the effects of being younger[1] than grade level on the adolescent student in Grades 7 through 12.

The following questions were addressed:

1. What are the characteristics of the young student; i.e., who are they; what is the racial, sexual, and academic makeup of the group; and why have they accelerated beyond their age-mates?

2. How does the age/grade difference affect selected academic areas of the young student's life?

3. How does the age/grade difference affect selected social aspects of the young student's life?

The procedures for answering the above questions included (1) examining school records to obtain demographic and test score information and (2) surveying both students and their parents to gather more in-depth information on their experiences and their interests and accomplishments.[2]

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[1]A young student is defined as any student who is at least six months younger than the traditional age as determined by Maryland's December 31 cut off date. The six months were added to eliminate the borderline cases, such as those who would be only one day younger than the traditional age.

[2]From a total of 358 young students, a sample of 238 students in Grades 7 through 12 was drawn. Twenty-five percent of the 155 students in Grades 7, 8, and 9 were sampled. Each of the 203 students in Grades 10, 11, and 12 were contacted. In addition, one parent of each student interviewed was also interviewed. This sample represented 66 percent of the young student population.

Interviews with 73 percent of the students and parents in the sample were completed. Reasons such as the student had moved away (3%), could not be reached (9%), wouldn't permit the interview (2%), and incorrect information on the computer (13%) comprised the remaining 27 percent.

FINDINGS

Who are the young students? How did they become accelerated?

The population of young students in Grades 7 through 12 in the Montgomery County Public Schools totaled 358 students for the year 1980-81, 1 percent of the county's public school population. Table 1 compares the young student population with the MCPS population for Grades 7 through 12 by race and sex. Analysis of the statistics on racial/ethnic and sexual characteristics for this population of students indicated that all minorities and females were overrepresented in the population of young students, while white students and male students were underrepresented.

TABLE 1
Number and Percentage of Students in
Young Student Sample and School Population

As of September 30, 1980
By Race and Sex
Grades 7-12

	Young Student Sample		MCPS Population	
	#	%	#	%
Asian	52	15	2,427	5
Black	58	16	5,407	11
Hispanic	23	6	1,818	4
White	225	63	40,463	80
Male	138	39	24,994	50
Female	220	61	25,228	50
Total	358		50,222	

Data from the interviews indicated that the students were young for one of three reasons. One reason was that the students started first grade before the age of six years. This reason was reported by 21 percent of those sampled. They typically began school at age 5 somewhere outside of Montgomery County Public Schools because they were bright and ready for school, or it was the customary way of proceeding in that particular place. Parents as a whole had positive feelings about starting their children early either because it was routine or it seemed to be working out all right.

Skipping a grade and wishing to graduate early were reasons mentioned by 76 percent of the respondents. Sixty-six percent of the students had skipped a grade or, in some cases, more than one grade. Usually it was kindergarten or first grade, but 11 percent skipped the sixth grade. An additional 11 percent had attended summer school to acquire sufficient credits to graduate early. This tended to occur within the Montgomery County Public Schools. The teacher and/or administrator initiated the action to skip in most cases. The exception was for those students who attended summer school, when the student was the prime initiator of the action.

Most parents (72%) reported that they had positive feelings about the skip because the student needed the challenge, the work was too easy, and he/she would have been bored otherwise. Those who did express negative feelings, though, were concerned with things like physical safety, the student being on his/her own at a younger age, or the student having to compete with older students. Also, some parents were not concerned about the academic areas but were worried about some of the social aspects.

How does the age/grade difference affect selected academic areas of the young student's life?

Test scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, the Cognitive Abilities Test, and the Tests of Academic Progress for the 1979-80 school year were examined where available for the young student group and compared with those of the total MCPS group. The scores for the young student were significantly[3] higher than the average MCPS scores on all subtests and Composite. This held true in all grades for which scores were available. Table 2 presents the normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores for each subtest and Composite for both the overall MCPS population and the young student group by grade. The table also illustrates the difference between the NCE scores for the overall MCPS population and the young student group. Significant differences are indicated by a plus (+) sign.

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[3]Increases or decreases of more than seven NCE points are considered significant. Seven NCE points represent a change of one third of a standard deviation. This is often used in educational evaluation to indicate meaningful change.

TABLE 2

NCE Scores for MCPS Population and Young Students by Grade

	7			9		
	MCPS Population N=7160	Young Students N=48	Difference	MCPS Population N=7686	Young Students N=55	Difference
Verbal	60	82	22+	60	74	14+
Quantitative	63	86	23+	65	82	17+
Nonverbal	65	76	11+	67	77	10+
Vocabulary	55	65	10+	55	63	8+
Reading Comprehension	54	64	10+	53	59	6
Spelling	54	67	13+	52	62	10+
Capitalization	58	68	10+	54	61	7
Punctuation	57	69	12+	55	63	8+
Usage	55	65	10+	54	62	8+
Mpa Reading	59	67	8+	58	61	3
Graphs	57	68	11+	55	61	6
Reference Materials	57	67	10+	55	59	4
Concepts	58	71	13+	53	61	8+
Problem Solving	55	66	11+	53	59	6
Composite	57	70	13+	56	63	7

	11		
	MCPS Population N=7833	Young Students N=54	Difference
Social Studies	53	62	9+
Composition	56	67	11+
Science	58	72	14+
Reading	55	69	14+
Math	60	72	12+
Literature	54	61	7
Composite	57	71	14+

In response to a query about academic grades received, parents reported that their students did very well. Forty-seven percent were getting all A's and B's. An additional 19 percent of the students were bringing home straight A's. A significantly higher proportion of students in the skipped group earned all A's and B's when compared to students in the early group. The latter group tended to earn some C's in addition to the A's and B's.

Parents indicated that the current school work was not too difficult for the students because they were placed where they felt they should be. Further, the work would not necessarily have been easier if they had not gone ahead because he/she would have been bored or misplaced, thus making achievement more difficult. The students responded similarly to the same questions. In addition, students reported that they could remember relatively few problems at the time of entry into school or the skip.

Academic career goals were expressed in the form of college intentions by nearly all. Ninety-three percent of the parents reported that their sons/daughters would attend college after graduating from high school. They felt that the choice of college would not be affected by the young age; but for those who expressed some concern over this (38%), it was that the parent wanted his/her student close to or living at home during the first year. The students tended to concur with what was reported by their parents regarding their plans after high school. Thirty-eight percent said they would live at home at least for the first year. Interestingly, those who indicated they would live on campus appeared to have the highest grades. In addition, 12 (8%) of the 150 students who chose college indicated that they would wait a year before attending.

How does the age/grade difference affect selected social aspects of the young student's life?

According to 76 percent of the parents, students participated in activities within school and in activities outside of school. In school, academic clubs and sports were reported most often; and, in fact, the clubs were dominated by students in the senior high grades. Outside of school, sports, group membership, and jobs occupied their time. Both in school and out, more of the skipped group tended to belong to clubs and groups than did the early group. Furthermore, it appeared that the higher the grades earned, the more participation there was in school clubs.

Driving and working were affected by age more often than dating, making friends, or forming relationships, but not to any significant degree. Driving and working were also reported most often in response to a question about whether or not their friends could do things they couldn't. To a lesser degree, things like having a social life, being able to see certain movies, attending discoes, and drinking were mentioned.

Parents, as a whole (77 percent), indicated that they had no concerns in the above areas. However, those who did report concerns indicated that they were problems that were in the past. In general, parents did not report any overall social problems. Those students who did admit to encountering problems identified them as driving and dating.

Would they do it again?

Parents were asked if they would do it again, and 84 percent replied that they would. The majority of reasons included that they were very pleased with the way things had worked out or that the overall experience was more positive than negative. However, 8 parents (8 percent) did say they would not do it again and that the experience had been more negative than positive. They expressed the desire to achieve the results in a different way. For example, some felt that the gifted and talented programs now available in schools would have provided an appropriate avenue for the student. Others suggested that private school would have been preferable. The general feeling expressed by these 8 parents seemed to be that if there had been another way, it might have been better. A few parents just wanted their students with peers of their own age and felt that there was too much pressure involved in keeping up with older students, both socially and academically. Overall, though, parents were satisfied and would skip or begin their child early again if given the chance.

Students also were satisfied, as 89 percent of them reported that their overall experience had been good. Only a small group of students (9 percent) had mixed feelings. Although their overall experience was good, they felt that waiting another year might have been better. Most, however, indicated that they had adjusted well and had been ready for the experience. Another group indicated it had been good because they would be getting out of high school quicker. A third group felt that it gave them a head start on life or at least an extra year to decide what to do in life.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Parents who are faced with the decision to enter their child in school early or allow him/her to skip a grade tend to worry about what the decision will mean when he/she gets older and is faced with the problems of adolescence. The results of this study show that for most parents this worry is unfounded. Parents and students appeared to be satisfied with their decision to skip a grade or start school early. The students were earning high grades, participating in school clubs and activities, and aspiring to go to college. The few problems that were discussed were largely social in nature and frequently temporary.

It is evident that the students in this study were not adversely affected by being younger than their classmates and in most cases were doing well personally and academically. This finding is especially noteworthy with regard to those who started school early since these students had generally not been specially selected for their academic or social precocity. This suggests that parents and practitioners should not be overly cautious about allowing early admission and that many students can, in fact, profit from starting school early or skipping a grade.

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